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The Gospel According to Nephi: An Essay on 2 Nephi 31

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In the Doctrine and Covenants, the Latter-day Saints are directed at least five times to look to the Book of Mormon for “the fulness of the (everlasting) gospel” (D&C 20:9, 27:5, 42:12, and 135:3) or “all those parts of my gospel” (D&C 10:46).¹ Most easily recognizable as an authoritative statement of this gospel is 3 Nephi 27:13–21, where Christ comes one final time to his Nephite disciples and clearly states the basic principles of his gospel to them. Perhaps less obviously, the same principles are also stated by him in 3 Nephi 11:31–39 when he first appears to the Nephites gathered at Bountiful a year after the great destructions that signaled the crucifixion of Christ to them. But the earliest, most comprehensive, and least recognized teaching of the gospel of Christ in the Book of Mormon by the Savior himself is reported by Lehi’s son Nephi² in the form of a brief appendix to his second book.³

In this essay, I hope to demonstrate how foundational 2 Nephi 31 was for all Book of Mormon writers and how important this passage of scripture is for understanding Christ’s gospel in this last dispensation for a wide range of readers.⁴ My aim is to help readers recognize 2 Nephi 31 as the primary source for gospel teaching in the Book of Mormon and thereby as the

intended primary source for learning the gospel in the Restoration. It is easy for modern-day readers of the Book of Mormon to miss the central importance Nephi had in mind as he wrote this passage. It seems that Nephi hoped to focus his readers' attention on this explanation of the gospel by holding it back until the end of his writing, rather than including it at the beginning of his history, where it best fits in his chronological account. This chapter contains many intertextual references, which Nephi used to signal this chapter's preeminent importance.

While Nephi probably saved the material in 2 Nephi 3:1 for the end of his writings to give it proper emphasis, the actual effect of his strategy on modern readers, in my experience, is that they tend to overlook it. It may also be difficult for readers to keep things straight when Nephi is being taught the gospel by two voices inside a vision narrated first by the Spirit of the Lord and then by an angel—voices that were not even mentioned in his original account of that great vision in 1 Nephi 1:1–14. Because of our modern writing methods, we don't learn the techniques used by ancient writers to signal emphasis. For example, very few of my BYU honors students realized without some help that 2 Nephi 3:1 is intentionally set up as a flashback, and that the material it contains constitutes a previously unreported section of the great vision given to Nephi—and presumably to his father before him—at the first camp in the wilderness while Nephi was probably still a teenager.

Nephi starts the presentation off by casting our minds back to that great vision that was given separately to Lehi and then Nephi, in which they had seen the baptism of Jesus by a prophet of God: "I would that ye should remember that I have spoken unto you concerning that prophet which the Lord shewed unto me that should baptize the Lamb of God" (v. 4). Nephi's earlier reportage of that vision contained a single verse briefly describing Christ's baptism—a verse that we can now recognize as a placeholder (1 Nephi 1:27) that would be used to reorient his readers in 2 Nephi 3:1. Without forewarning, Nephi here relates the rest of that story by adding nineteen more verses—sharing with us what he had learned about the gospel or doctrine of Christ⁵ as he watched the baptism of Christ in vision.

We should notice in this connection with Nephi's earlier vision of Christ's baptism that 2 Nephi 3:1 is foreshadowed by the same occurrence in his father Lehi's vision. Nephi warns us in 1 Nephi 8 that "to be short in writing" he does not "speak all the words of my father" (verses 29–30). But then two chapters later he does include Lehi's long explanation to his sons of things

that he had learned about “a prophet which should come before the Messiah to prepare the way of the Lord” (1 Nephi 10:7). The account given by Lehi here and recorded by Nephi is three times as long and detailed as Nephi’s own account of the baptism of Jesus in his own vision.⁶ We should also notice that immediately after describing the baptism of Jesus to his sons, Lehi spoke to them “concerning the gospel” (1 Nephi 10:11). Nephi repeats that same pattern exactly in 2 Nephi 31, but with the difference that he finally provides a much longer and detailed account of how he was taught the gospel by the Father and the Son. We should assume that Lehi had that same experience and that this is what he was sharing with his sons at this point in 1 Nephi 10.

As Nephi unfolds this extended account in 2 Nephi 31, we learn that he was taught the basic gospel principles by two voices. It may be that we have trouble fitting this into our concept of that vision because Nephi never claims to have seen these teachers. Even with the huge surge in teaching and scholarly writing about the Book of Mormon in recent decades,⁷ very few readers of this chapter can remember confidently who it was that was teaching Nephi as he watched the baptism of Jesus in this vision. Through years of personal inquiry, I have learned that relatively few Book of Mormon readers seem to have been appropriately impressed with the fact that—as part of that vision—Nephi was actually team-taught the gospel by the Father and the Son! Nephi quotes each one of them three times! We do not have a comparable passage anywhere in scripture, and perhaps the only other recorded experience with the Father and the Son together that would be comparable would be Joseph Smith’s First Vision. Second Nephi 31 is clearly the most authoritative and unfiltered statement of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the Father anywhere in known scripture. And of the three accounts we have of Christ teaching his gospel to Nephites, this is the only one presented by the prophet who received that teaching in the first instance and in his own original words. The other two accounts are excerpted from older records and then compiled by Mormon more than two centuries after the fact. Small wonder that Joseph was instructed in several revelations that the Book of Mormon contains “the fulness of the everlasting gospel” (D&C 42:3). But none of the revelations given to him contain a similar account. The Restoration revelations all send us to the Book of Mormon for that.

Second Nephi 31 is also the earliest comprehensive statement of the gospel message in the Book of Mormon—even though several previous passages make it clear that Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob knew the gospel—as it clearly sets

forth all six elements of that message as it is recognized in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints today, including:

1. Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.
2. Repentance.
3. Baptism of water.
4. Gift of the Holy Ghost.
5. Enduring to the end.⁸
6. Eternal life.

These same six elements are included in both of the other Book of Mormon presentations of the gospel or doctrine of Christ that were given by Christ himself.⁹

The Loss of the 116 Pages Leads to Inclusion of 2 Nephi 31

Once we have learned these six “parts” or “points” of his gospel from these Book of Mormon passages, we can see them all mentioned already in an early revelation to Joseph Smith in which the Lord explained the importance of their inclusion in the final configuration of the Book of Mormon. In the early summer of 1828, Joseph succumbed to the demands of Martin Harris and allowed him to take the first 116 pages of the translation manuscript home to show his family and friends. While the negative consequences of this event are well known, the subsequent revelation that came to Joseph Smith seems to suggest that these happenings actually created the opportunity to include Nephi’s account of the gospel into the combination version of the Nephite record that Joseph would be publishing. For, as Joseph learned in this revelation, these small plates of Nephi “do throw greater views upon my gospel,” and “contain *all those parts of my gospel*” the Nephite prophets had “desired in their prayers should come forth unto this people” (D&C 10:45–46; emphasis added). And by this means the Lord stated, they could “bring to light *the true points of my doctrine, yea, and the only doctrine which is in me*” (D&C 10:62; compare 2 Nephi 31:21). This passage can easily be interpreted to mention all six of the elements of Christ’s gospel or “points of his doctrine” as it will be explained in the subsequent discussion of 2 Nephi 31 and later in this essay:

1. “Whosoever should (1) *believe* in this gospel . . . might have (6) *eternal life*” (D&C 10:50).

2. “Whosoever (2) *repenteth* and cometh unto me (3 and 4) [*baptism and receiving the Holy Ghost*], the same is my church” (D&C 10:67).

3. “Whosoever is of my church and (5) *endureth . . . to the end*, will I (6 again) *establish*” (D&C 10:69).

As regrettable as the loss of the Book of Lehi was, the Lord apparently saw that loss leading to the inclusion of the most comprehensive and authoritative account of his gospel that the Book of Mormon now contains—to which the members of his restored church have been directed in order to find the fulness of his gospel.

Plain and Precious Things

The passages discussed to this point seem to suggest that the principal themes for appreciation of the Book of Mormon in LDS discourse have never quite matched up with the perspective the Lord presents repeatedly to his prophets. From the beginning of the Restoration LDS teaching has emphasized an understanding of the Book of Mormon as evidence or proof that Joseph Smith was a prophet sent in these latter days to open the last dispensation.¹⁰ To this day, we invite investigators to read the book and then to take Moroni’s challenge and to “ask God . . . if these things are not true” (Moroni 10:4), where we usually assume “these things” refers to the veracity of Joseph Smith’s account of the Book of Mormon and its origins. But in the preceding sentence, “these things” refers directly to the mercy the Lord has shown “unto the children of men, from the creation of Adam” down to the present time (Moroni 10:3)—a mercy most obviously identified with the gospel of Jesus Christ, which teaches all mankind how to repent and receive eternal life, through the power of his Atonement.

Again we are referred back to Nephi’s great vision in which he was shown that after the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, when the Bible first went forth from the Jews to the Gentiles, “it contained the of the gospel of the Lord” (1 Nephi 13:24). But then Nephi was also shown that apostate Christianity had “taken away from the gospel of he Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious” (v. 26). Four times Nephi was told that the removal of these “plain and precious things” from the Bible, will cause “an exceedingly great many” to stumble “insomuch that Satan hath great power over them” (vv. 28–29, 34). But, Nephi was informed, the Lord will also manifest himself unto the Nephite prophets who would “write many things which I shall

minister unto them, which shall be plain and precious”—writings which will feature “my gospel . . . and my rock and my salvation” (vv. 35–36). Nephi was then promised that these Nephite writings would eventually come forth to both Gentiles and Jews “upon all the face of the earth” and “make known the plain and precious things which have been taken away from them and shall make known to all kindreds, tongues, and people that the Lamb of God is the Eternal Father and the Savior of the world and that all men must come unto him or they cannot be saved” (vv. 39–40). The Lord’s perspective on the Book of Mormon clearly describes it as a vehicle for restoring the fulness of the gospel and the plain and precious things that have been lost from the Bible. And 2 Nephi 31 is one of the key texts in the Book of Mormon’s presentation of Christ’s gospel. The repeated emphasis on “plainness” in these passages will now be examined to show how these references play an important role in Nephi’s framing of that text.

Context and Formal Structure of Nephi’s Final Sermon

Before discussing these gospel elements in more detail, we should first examine the context and the approach chosen by Nephi for this key passage. The eight chapters following the Isaiah chapters (2 Nephi 25–32) are presented as a final sermon delivered by Nephi to his brethren. While these chapters do contain some commentary on the prophecies of Isaiah, we soon notice that their principal content is based largely on what Nephi (and Lehi) had learned in that great vision given at the first camp in the wilderness. For example, the prophecies of the coming of “the Only Begotten of the Father” in six hundred years, his Crucifixion and Resurrection, the scattering of the Jews among all nations, and the latter-day bringing forth of his words so that all may be judged fairly in 2 Nephi 25:12–19, all go back to their early vision (“for I have seen his day,” v. 13, see 1 Nephi 11:32–33). This is significant because these prophecies are not as plainly stated anywhere in the writings of Isaiah. Nephi begins by explaining that his prophecies will focus on the same events as those described in the prophecies of Isaiah. But Nephi will prophesy (1) “according to the spirit which is in me”¹¹ and (2) “according to the plainness which hath been with me” (2 Nephi 25:4). Nephi then creates the envelope that will contain the long first section of his sermon by beginning with: “I will proceed with mine own prophecy” (2 Nephi 25:7), and then ending with: “And now I Nephi make an end of my prophesying” (2 Nephi 31:1). This sermon and the prophecies it includes will convey to Nephi’s brethren the key messages that



Jerry Thompson, *Lehi Looking Heavenward*, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

While Nephi took the long view of human lives as a whole, Lehi's account of the same vision was very focused on the present prospects for faithful living by his own family.

he has distilled from that vision—with added insight from Isaiah’s prophecies—in more than four decades of teaching the gospel and the scriptures to his people. It also seems clear that he now goes beyond those sources to include new prophecies “according to the spirit which is in me” (2 Nephi 25:4). The intended audience is most immediately the congregation of the Nephites that will survive him. But it also includes eventually the Lamanites, the Jews, and the Gentiles who will read and believe his words in the future.

The sermon itself is presented in formally delimited sections using the technique of *inclusio* or envelope structure, by which an ancient writer could mark off sections of a text by repeating at the end of the passage a phrase or statement from the beginning of the passage.¹² This same technique is also used by Jesus Christ in both of the passages Mormon reports (3 Nephi 11 and 27), where the phrases “this is my doctrine” or “this is my/the gospel” are used to mark them off from the surrounding narrative. This certainly suggests the possibility that the Father and the Son may have used that same technique when they presented their gospel to Nephi and Lehi in their visions, leading Nephi to preserve the same rhetorical device in his expanded reportage of their teaching to him. The long *inclusio* that constitutes the first section of the sermon is marked off doubly—first by Nephi’s references to his own prophecy as discussed above—and second by his introductory discussion of plainness in writing and prophesying: “My soul delighteth in plainness” (2 Nephi 25:4), which he repeats exactly in 2 Nephi 31:3. This long first section includes the original chapters 11 and 12 from the 1830 edition—chapter divisions that were made by Nephi and that come to modern-day readers directly from the original translation.

The Three Envelopes or *Inclusios* that Structure Nephi’s Last Sermon

1. 2 Nephi 25:4
“I shall prophesy according to the plainness”

- 2 Nephi 25:4
“My soul delighteth in plainness”

- 2 Nephi 31:2
“According to the plainness of my prophesying”

2 Nephi 31:3
 “My soul delighteth in plainness”

2. 2 Nephi 31:2
 “A few words . . . concerning the doctrine of Christ”

2 Nephi 31:21b
 “This is the doctrine of Christ”

3. 2 Nephi 31:21b
 “This is the doctrine of Christ”

2 Nephi 32:6
 “This is the doctrine of Christ”

The second section of Nephi’s final sermon, the focus of this essay, is also marked off as an *inclusio* by Nephi’s two references to “the doctrine of Christ” (2 Nephi 31:2 and 21). This section is the same as chapter 13 from the 1830 edition. A third brief *inclusio* is created at the end of the sermon as Nephi expands the discussion to explain his phrase “voice of angels” and ends a second time repeating the full clause at 2 Nephi 31:21: “This is the doctrine of Christ” (2 Nephi 32:6). The unity of the three sections as smaller parts of the same sermon is signaled quite creatively by Nephi as he overlaps the first two sections by starting the second *inclusio* in the sentence preceding the sentence that terminates the first *inclusio*. And the small appended explanation of the voice of angels that constitutes the third *inclusio*, is signaled by the repetition of the full clause in 2 Nephi 31:21 that incorporates the introductory phrase from 2 Nephi 31:2 to signal the end of the second *inclusio*.¹³

The written version of the sermon as we have it in 2 Nephi 25:4–32:6 is prefaced by a few personal, context-setting sentences in which Nephi explains, “Wherefore I write unto my people” (2 Nephi 25:3). Again at the end, he provides more context for readers of this written version, and laments “I Nephi cannot say more. The Spirit stoppeth mine utterance” (2 Nephi 32:7). In a final aside to readers—also addressed as “my brethren”—Nephi goes on to urge them to seek knowledge and understanding, to “pray always and not faint” (2 Nephi 32:7–9).

Nephi's Sermon, Section 1: A Focus on Christ

Nephi's concluding sermon has two main sections that each have a separate message. The first section (2 Nephi 25–30) integrates the view of the future as seen by Nephi and Lehi in their visions with that of Isaiah. This integrated view is presented as a prophecy about Jesus Christ and his importance for the Nephites, for all Israel, and for the nations of the world. The second section presents the *gospel* or *way* provided by the Father and the Son, through which all individuals will receive the invitation and support they may need to be able to enter into eternal life—in effect, the standard by which the eternal welfare of every individual, whether gentile or Israelite, may be predicted.

Nephi's Christocentric reading of Isaiah becomes explicit in his own writing. Nephi begins his long sermon/prophecy by describing the future coming and ministry of Jesus Christ among the Jews, who “will reject him because of their iniquities and the hardness of their hearts and the stiffness of their necks” (2 Nephi 25:12). They will subsequently “be scattered among all nations” until a distant future in which “they shall be persuaded to believe in Christ the Son of God and the atonement . . . at that time, the day will come that it must needs be expedient that they should believe these things” (v.16). It then becomes clear that Nephi understands that his own writings will play a key role in this restoration of Israel “from their lost and fallen state” as the Lord proceeds “to do a marvelous work and a wonder among the children of men” (v. 17). For “he shall bring forth his words unto them . . . for the purpose of convincing them of the true Messiah” (v. 18). “For this cause hath the Lord God promised unto me that these things which I write shall be kept and preserved and . . . shall go from generation to generation as long as the earth shall stand;” providing for us one example of the promises alluded to by the Lord in the 1828 revelation to Joseph Smith as described above (vv. 21–22). And so it is that Nephi and his brother Jacob “labor diligently to write, to persuade our children and also our brethren to believe in Christ and to be reconciled to God” (v. 23). “We talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ; . . . that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins” (v. 26). And so, Nephi concludes, “The right way is to believe in Christ and deny him not.” Because “Christ is the Holy One of Israel . . . ye must bow down before him, and worship him with all your might, mind, and strength, and your whole soul” (v.29).

Nephi goes on to prophesy that the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ will launch a new kind of ministry among the peoples of the world.

His prophets among the descendants of Lehi will find some success, but will be persecuted and killed by the wicked. Jesus himself will come to the righteous Nephites after the wicked have been destroyed during the cataclysmic events attending his death. Several generations of righteous people will follow and will in turn provide a witness to all the world—even in future dispensations—that Jesus lives and that his gospel is true (2 Nephi 27). Nephi then details the events through which this record—compiled centuries earlier by the Nephite prophets—will come forth in the last days and will provide a means by which all men everywhere will be commanded to repent and come unto Christ. It will be a day in which false doctrines will prevail, and most of the Gentiles will fight against the Nephite record and its teachings (2 Nephi 28–29). But many of the Gentiles will believe and will use the Nephite record to teach the remnant of Lehi, the Jews, and other Gentiles. For, “the Lord God shall commence his work among all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people to bring about the restoration of his people upon the earth” (2 Nephi 30:8). The second and much briefer section of Nephi’s sermon then details the actual teaching or *doctrine of Christ* that his messengers will bear to the world in that day (2 Nephi 31).

Nephi’s Sermon, Section 2: The Literary Mechanics of 2 Nephi 31

It is clear from the text that Nephi wrote this account at least forty years after the great vision was received at the first camp in the wilderness (compare 2 Nephi 5: 28 and 34). The importance he placed on this part of that vision is reflected not only in its placement at the end, but also in the density and the complexity of its composition. In the process of telling us what the Father and the Son taught him on the original occasion, Nephi presents the basic gospel message five times using a total of twenty-three shorthand statements of the gospel. He is able to use this complex set of repetitions and variations to introduce a powerful set of connections between the six basic elements of the gospel and to integrate his own understanding and testimony into the whole. While space constraints will not allow exploration of all those connections, I will delineate below the basic structural features of this text.

A fivefold presentation. In 2 Nephi 31, Nephi artfully combines quotations from the Father and the Son with his own insights and testimony to present the basic gospel message five times in varied ways, which build cumulatively to a comprehensive conclusion.¹⁴ The first explanation features the example of the Lamb of God who showed all mankind “the straitness of the

path and the narrowness of the gate by which they should enter” by humbling himself before the Father and by witnessing unto the Father by baptism that he would keep his commandments—after which the Father sent the Holy Ghost to him in the form of a dove (vv. 4–10).

The voices of both the Father and the Son are quoted in the second variation pointing out to the young Nephi the elements of Christ’s example that are expected of all individuals; repentance and baptism are required for all who would receive the Holy Ghost (vv. 11–12). These quotations also establish the supreme authority of this articulation of basic gospel principles. The third variation (v. 13) features Nephi’s testimony that if his brethren will follow the Son by sincerely repenting of their sins and witnessing to the Father by baptism that they are willing to take upon them the name of Christ, that they, too, may receive “the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost.”

The fourth variation invokes the voices of the Father and the Son again as they repeat and further explain each of the basic elements of the doctrine of Christ (vv. 14–15). The Son first recapitulates the three principal points of repentance, baptism of water, and baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost, and then adds a warning that anyone, who “after this should deny” him, would have been better off not to have known him. The Father endorses the words of the Son as “true and faithful,” and reformulates the warning positively as a promise: “he that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved.” We see confirming evidence that this instruction was part of Nephi’s original vision when he quotes this same language in his first report of that vision (1 Nephi 13:37—“if they endure to the end”). Since 2005 the Church has officially recognized this warning and promise as an articulation of a fifth basic gospel principle.¹⁵

In the fifth presentation (vv. 16–20), Nephi draws together all the gospel elements that have been introduced in the first four—combining them with his own insights and testimony. No one can be saved that will not endure to the end. Repentance and baptism by water constitute the gate by which men can enter onto the path that leads to eternal life. Those who enter sincerely will receive “a remission of [their] sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost. At this point they are “in this straight¹⁶ and narrow path which leads to eternal life.” The image of a path introduced here not only informs Nephi’s presentation of the gospel, but is also used repeatedly by his successors. Only now, at the conclusion, does Nephi finally introduce the requirement of faith in Christ. Christ’s new followers have only made it “thus far by the word of Christ with

unshaken faith in him, relying wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save” (v. 19). Further, they must continually exhibit this same “steadfastness in Christ” as they “press forward” and “endure to the end” (v. 20). And only in this fifth formulation are all six gospel elements made explicit.

It may also be helpful to notice that these five presentations are divided into two main groups, each of which starts with repentance and baptism, and then builds cumulatively to a climax that includes all six elements. The first half of the chapter (verses 4–16) begins with the vision of the baptism of Jesus and uses five quotations from the Father and the Son to establish each of the five basic gospel elements as requirements for eternal life—but with primary attention focused on baptism and repentance. In the second half (verses 17–20), Nephi restates the entire complex in his own words, developing in more detail his understanding of faith, the functions of the Holy Ghost, and enduring to the end more fully.

The method of accumulation. At no point in this chapter does Nephi simply list out the six gospel elements that he is presenting—as a modern writer would certainly do. Rather, the passage presents a series of twenty-three statements—grouped in a series of five presentations of the doctrine of Christ—each of which mentions and relates two or more of the basic gospel elements. It is only by accumulating the repeated elements in the passage that we can see clearly how Nephi understands the gospel. These six elements are mentioned a total of sixty-four times in these twenty-three statements with the following frequencies: faith (8), repentance (14), baptism (19), Holy Ghost (9), enduring (8), and eternal life (6)—all within 2 Nephi 31.¹⁷ The striking fact is that exactly this same method is used by the Savior in his two presentations of the gospel as reported by Mormon in 3 Nephi 11 and 27, suggesting again that this method may have also been used when the Father and the Son presented their gospel to Nephi in that original vision given at the first camp in the wilderness. If that is correct, we would then see Nephi’s late composition as preserving the formal structure of their teaching as presented originally to him. However, he also incorporates his own commentary that most likely developed during his forty-plus years of reflection and teaching.

A meristic presentation. Recognizing that there is a six-element formula that defines the gospel of Jesus Christ helps us to see another important rhetorical feature of this passage. Once we understand that the gospel features these six basic elements, we can always recognize partial listings of those elements as implicitly referring to the entire set. When Nephi quotes the Father

saying, “He that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved (v. 15),” only the last two gospel elements are stated explicitly. But we immediately understand that the four unmentioned elements are not excluded, but are assumed to be essential parts of the saved person’s life.

This rhetorical technique of using selected items from a known list to invoke the whole complex or list in the mind of a reader is the literary device called *merismus* and is commonly used in the Bible.¹⁸ For example, Mark 16:16 quotes Jesus’s statement of his gospel to his disciples as follows: “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved.” This and other similar passages are often used to argue that all that is required for salvation is faith in Christ, or faith and baptism.¹⁹ But with the Book of Mormon presentations of the gospel, we can see that there are five things necessary for any person who wishes to be saved. Furthermore, we can see that statements that only *explicitly* state a lesser number of those elements are *implicitly* invoking the entire list. Unfortunately, there is no single passage in the New Testament that demonstrates this insight so clearly as does 2 Nephi 31 for the Book of Mormon.

In retrospect we can see that this passage constitutes a brilliant assemblage of twenty-three gospel merisms that use both repetition and the introduction of new relationships between gospel elements to develop a clear though complex understanding of the gospel message. Once that message was established in this early passage, later writers were able to use the same meristic technique to refer to the gospel hundreds of times in the Book of Mormon text.²⁰ Understanding how Nephi has used *merismus* in 2 Nephi 31 can help modern readers to identify and appreciate these scattered references to the gospel of Jesus Christ much more effectively. And again, this exact technique was used again in this same way by the Savior in his later presentations of the gospel to Nephites as reported in 3 Nephi 11 and 27, which makes Nephi’s presentation of the gospel in this way authentic and legitimate.

Nephi’s presentation of the gospel of Christ. Unlike the two later passages in which Mormon presents Christ teaching his gospel as quotations without editorial commentary, Nephi provides us in 2 Nephi 31 with a highly developed presentation of his own understanding of the gospel as derived from what he was taught by the Father and the Son, quoting them repeatedly to make and substantiate his points. By quoting each of them three times, he makes it clear that this teaching carries the highest possible authority and veracity.²¹ No other prophet claims to have been taught the basic elements of the gospel

by the Father. And the unity of the Father and the Son in their teaching is evident, just as their separate individuality as divine beings is explicit.

Rather than proceeding directly to a presentation of the basic gospel elements, Nephi begins with a question—why did the sinless Lamb of God need to be baptized in order “to fulfill all righteousness”? If we assume that Christ was just going through the motions to provide us with an example of what we must do, we miss the essence of repentance and baptism as these were taught to Nephi. Even the Lamb of God, being holy, “according to the flesh,” needed, in order “to fulfill all righteousness,” (1) to humble himself before the Father, and (2) to witness (by baptism) “that he would be obedient unto him in keeping his commandments.” Nephi teaches us here that the essence of repentance is to humble ourselves before the Father—giving up our own agendas and ways of doing things and turning back to him, accepting by covenant the path he will show us as the one we will follow. And the essence of baptism is also an action of the convert and not something done to him. By baptism we “witness to the Father”—in the manner he has prescribed for that witnessing—that we have repented, that we have covenanted to obey his commandments, and that we will “take upon [us] the name of Christ” (v. 13). Even the Son of God, “according to the flesh,” was required to so humble himself and witness before the Father.²²

The promise of the Father to all his children was that if they would enter this path, or the straight and narrow way, by repentance and baptism, they would receive the Holy Ghost (v. 18), even as Nephi had seen the Holy Ghost descend upon Christ “in the form of a dove” (v. 8). Nephi quotes the voice of the Son restating this promise: “He that is baptized in my name, to him will the Father give the Holy Ghost, like unto me” (v. 12). Nephi emphasizes with quintuple redundancy that the Father’s decision to send the baptized person the Holy Ghost depends on the sincerity of their repentance and baptismal witness: “If ye shall follow the Son, with *full purpose of heart*, acting *no hypocrisy* and *no deception before God* but with *real intent*, repenting of your sins, witnessing unto the Father that *ye are willing* to take upon you the name of Christ by baptism, yea, by following your Lord and your Savior down into the water according to his word, behold, then shall ye receive the Holy Ghost” (v. 13; emphasis added). The impossibility of successful deception was emphasized by Nephi’s brother Jacob, who taught that “the keeper of the gate is the Holy One of Israel. . . . He cannot be deceived, for the Lord God is his name” (2 Nephi 9:41).

Nephi then spells out a multiplicity of functions performed by the Holy Ghost in the lives of Christ's followers—all of which are essential in bringing them to eternal life. First, and most obviously, “the remission of sins comes by fire and by the Holy Ghost” (v. 13; compare vv. 12, 14, and 17). Book of Mormon prophets consistently held this view and never characterized baptism as a washing away of sins—an understanding borrowed from pagan religions by early Christians and taught regularly throughout Christian history. Baptism is the act of the convert as he witnesses to the Father that he has repented and taken the name of Christ upon him. The Holy Ghost comes to a man or a woman at the choice of the Father, to bring the remission of sins and other essential blessings.²³

Nephi identifies three additional functions that the Holy Ghost serves in the lives of Christ's followers. First, the Holy Ghost enables its recipients to “speak with a new tongue—yea, even with the tongue of angels” (v. 14). As Nephi later realizes he needs to explain, this means that they can “speak the words of Christ” as they “speak by the power of the Holy Ghost,” even as angels speak (32:3). Second, the Holy Ghost “witnesses of the Father and the Son” (v. 18), providing the recipient with a testimony of them and of their gospel. This experience with the Holy Ghost sustains the recipient in this life and provides the basis for the hope of eventually experiencing the presence of the Father and the Son for all who will receive eternal life—the final fulfillment of the Father's promise.²⁴

Third, Nephi clarifies the enigmatic reference to “feasting upon the words of Christ” by explaining that the words of Christ are given by the Holy Ghost, and “the words of Christ will tell you all things what ye should do” (2 Nephi 32:3). For those of us who still cannot understand what he is saying (v. 4), he boils the gospel message down to this: “If ye will enter in by the way (repentance and baptism) and receive the Holy Ghost, *it* will show unto you all things what ye should do” (2 Nephi 32:5; emphasis added). And so, enduring to the end—to be discussed next—can also be characterized as a process of “feasting upon the words of Christ” or doing what the Holy Ghost directs us to do. While it is tempting for us in a modern context to reinterpret Nephi's admonition as encouragement to study the scriptures, in this specific context he apparently intends us to understand “feasting upon the words of Christ” as choosing to act continually as directed by the Holy Ghost. The feasting envisioned by Nephi comprehends all the activities of our lives, and is not restricted to our time spent studying the scriptures.

In verses 14–16, Nephi reports in detail the powerful emphasis made by both the Father and the Son that none of our positive responses to this gospel invitation will lead to eternal life except for those who “endure to the end.” The point is made first negatively by the Son who states clearly that if someone who has repented and been baptized sincerely and then receives the blessing of the Holy Ghost as evidenced by speaking with the tongue of angels—and after all this should deny (reject or turn against) him, “it would have been better for” that person “that [he] had not known me” (v. 14). The Father endorses these words as “true and faithful” and goes on to state the principle positively: “He that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved” (v. 15). Leaving no doubt of how important this principle is for all men to understand, Nephi concludes: “I know by this that unless a man shall endure to the end, in following the example of the Son of the Living God, he cannot be saved” (v. 16).

Nephi understands clearly that the reason he was shown the example of Jesus Christ’s baptism in vision was so that he and his people “might know the gate by which ye should enter” (v. 17). He then offers a verbal diagram or image to help us understand the gospel as it had been taught to him. The gospel represents the path by which all might find eternal life. The strait gate that allows people onto this “straight and narrow” path “is repentance and baptism by water, and then cometh a remission of your sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost” (v. 17). But all this is only a beginning, for the new convert has only entered into “this straight and narrow path which leads to eternal life” (v. 18). He or she must now “press forward, feasting upon the word of Christ and endure to the end,” in order to receive eternal life (v. 20).

We do not know if this image of the strait gate and the straight and narrow path is original with Nephi. It bears considerable similarity to the path described by Lehi and Nephi in their great vision, but seems to be a more abstract version, possibly as a result of the decades of experience Nephi has had in explaining it to his people. His brother Jacob seems to have the same image in mind when he says, “The way for man is narrow. But it lieth in a straight course before him. And the keeper of the gate is the Holy One of Israel” (2 Nephi 9:41).²⁵ Nephi’s late version of the path does not mention Lehi’s iconic rod of iron, but it does include the idea that the Holy Ghost “will show unto you all things what ye should do” (2 Nephi 32:5). And while eternal life as described by Nephi at the end of the path is awarded as a final judgment to those who have endured faithfully to the end, the fruit of the

tree of life described in Lehi and Nephi's visions can be enjoyed by the faithful in this life, and can then be lost by those who may be embarrassed by the mocking of unbelievers and apostatize. While these differences do not constitute contradictions, it does seem that in his final presentation, Nephi has taken the long view of human lives as a whole, while Lehi's account of the same vision was very focused on the present prospects for faithful living by his own immediate family.

Latter-day Saint discourse has long privileged the requirement of faith in Jesus Christ as the first principle of the gospel. Nephi also sees it as fundamental, but mentions it in last place, leading first with repentance, and thereby establishing a teaching model that is often followed by later Nephite prophets. But as he clarifies, no convert could have made it onto this path "save it were by the word of Christ with unshaken faith in him, relying wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save" (v. 19). On Nephi's model, we should not see faith as just a first step. Rather, that same faith must inform and sustain believers in each step of this gospel journey as they endure *faithfully* to the end.

Nephi further characterizes the process of enduring to the end in terms that give new meaning to the New Testament formula of *faith, hope, and charity*. We are instructed by him to "press forward" on this path "with a *steadfastness in Christ*, having a *perfect brightness of hope* and a *love of God and of all men*." By contextualizing this trilogy as the way in which a convert must endure to the end, Nephi provides a basis for the developed treatment faith, hope, and charity will receive in the closing chapters of the Book of Mormon from Mormon and Moroni.²⁶ Later, Alma also appears to take his instruction on this point directly from Nephi as he uses faith, hope, and charity to characterize the lives of the faithful (Alma 7:24).

Continuing the metaphor of the gospel as a path, Nephi closes this foundational presentation of that gospel by calling it "the way," and by affirming that "there is none other way . . . whereby man can be saved in the kingdom of God" (v. 21).²⁷ And, as he knows from personal experience, being instructed by them directly, this gospel is "the only and true doctrine of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost" (v. 21). His own frustration with those who cannot comprehend his effort to state this gospel plainly for the understanding of all becomes evident just four verses later: "Wherefore now after that I have spoken these words, if ye cannot understand them, it will be because ye

ask not, neither do ye knock. Wherefore ye are not brought into the light but must perish in the dark” (2 Nephi 32:4).

This passage may have served the Nephite dispensation in much the same way that Joseph Smith’s First Vision has served this last dispensation by providing the highest possible authority for its central claims—including the prophetic claims of the first leader. We find the Nephite prophets across 1000 years of ministry staying true to the concepts and phraseology introduced by Nephi in this passage. This is most clearly reflected in their teachings on the gospel, baptism, and charity. Although we cannot know the extent to which later prophets had access to Nephi’s small plates, it is clear that his phrasing and teachings persist through their writings to the very end of Mormon’s volume.

The Greatest Prophecy

We saw that Nephi formally introduced this passage by announcing that he had concluded his own prophesying. But is this chapter devoid of prophecy? Is it not the case that this chapter states more clearly than any other the conditions and choices by which the long-term future of every human being will be determined? The chapter began with an explicit reminder of the prophecy given to both Lehi and Nephi in their separate visions received at the first camp in the wilderness that a prophet would baptize Jesus Christ. But now Nephi goes beyond the prophecies reported by Lehi, Isaiah, and even himself regarding the futures of the Nephites, Lamanites, Jews, and Gentiles. In this chapter we are given a comprehensive prophecy from God the Father regarding the future possibilities of every one of his children that may be born into this world.

The long discussion of prophecies about different peoples and what would happen to them in the future, depending on whether or not they accepted the gospel of Jesus Christ, turns out to depend in turn on the choices made by individual members of those groups. The groups themselves provide a metaphor for the relationship that will exist between each individual member of any such group and their Father in Heaven. Being born into one group or another does not determine one’s fate. As Nephi concludes and emphasizes that “as many of the Gentiles as will repent are the covenant people of the Lord; and as many of the Jews as will not repent shall be cast off. For the Lord covenanteth with none save it be with them that repent and believe in his Son” (2 Nephi 30:2). We also learn here that the covenant Nephi sees binding men

to God is the covenant they make at the time they individually repent, turning to God and accepting the covenant he has offered to all men and women from the beginning.²⁸ It is the act of repentance that binds us to him as his “covenant people.”

Using the baptism of Jesus as an ensample for all mankind, Nephi invokes the authority of the Father and the Son as he spells out the promises of eternal life that they have offered to all men and women. But this is a conditional form of prophecy, for the outcome will be determined for each person through his or her own willingness to follow Christ and to endure to the end in faithfulness to him. The first great promise (and prophecy) from the Father was that for all who would enter in by the way (repentance and baptism), they would receive “a remission of [their] sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost” (vv. 17–18). The second great promise and prophecy the Father has extended to all his children from the beginning²⁹ was that everyone who repents and chooses to be baptized and then receives “the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost,” and then endures to the end—“the same shall be saved” (vv. 14–15). Nephi also quotes the Son’s warning (and prophecy) that for all those who—after receiving the fulfillment of the first promise—should then turn away and deny him, “it would be better for [them] that [they] had not known me” (v. 14).

This Is the Way—the Doctrine of Christ

Nephi powerfully emphasizes the conclusion of this key chapter by providing a sweeping assertion of its unique validity that is announced twice in parallel statements:

- 21 (a) And now behold, my beloved brethren, this is the way.
- (i) And there is none other way nor name given under heaven
 - (ii) whereby man can be saved in the kingdom of God.
- (b) And now behold, this is the doctrine of Christ,
- (i) and the only and true doctrine of the Father and of the son and of the Holy Ghost,
 - (ii) which is one God without end.³⁰

And we are forcibly reminded that for Nephi *the gospel of Jesus Christ* or *doctrine of Christ* is also termed *the way* or *the straight and narrow path* that

leads to eternal life—and that teaching is the central and final message of all his writings.

Nephi's concluding comments in chapter 33 make it clear that all his specific prophecies and teachings are meant to inspire his descendants, his brethren, and indeed, all mankind to respond to this greatest and universal promise and prophecy from their Father in Heaven. And so in a final prophecy, he warns all who read his words that "at the last day . . . you and I shall stand face to face before his bar. . . . For what I seal on earth shall be brought against you at the judgment bar. For thus hath the Lord commanded me" (2 Nephi 33:11 and 15).

Distinctive Teachings

I have noted previously that this foundational chapter expands our traditional summary of basic gospel principles to include "enduring to the end."³¹ A careful reading suggests it may offer correctives to many other traditional Christian teachings and, in some cases, even to some elements of LDS gospel discourse. Here is a partial listing of distinctive insights we can take from this chapter:

1. The most comprehensive and authoritative account of the full gospel of Jesus Christ was given around 590 BCE by the Father and the Son to Nephi, a young prophet from Jerusalem—and probably as well to his father, Lehi.
2. Several terms are used interchangeably to refer to the gospel of Jesus Christ, including "the doctrine of Christ," "the way," "the straight and narrow path," and "the word."
3. Baptism is not a washing away of sins, but constitutes a person's witness to the Father that he has repented of those sins and will keep his commandments.
4. The covenant we witness at baptism is actually made when we repent.
5. The essential elements of repentance are (1) humbling oneself before the Father, and (2) covenanting to obey him forever after.
6. Even though holy already, the Son of God was required to humble himself before the Father and to witness by baptism to a covenant that he would obey his commandments in order to fulfill all righteousness.
7. While baptism is necessary as a prerequisite for the remission of sins, this remission is a subsequent gift from the Father that comes "by fire and by the Holy Ghost."

8. All men have been promised by the Father from the beginning that if they would repent and accept baptism sincerely, they would receive the Holy Ghost and the remission of sins.
9. Only those who endure to the end can be saved. Neither the authorized ordinances, nor the reception of the Holy Ghost can guarantee eternal life.
10. Faith, hope, and charity characterize the mode of life by which converts to Christ's gospel must endure to the end.
11. Those who receive this blessing of the Spirit and then turn away or deny Christ would have been better off "not to have known" him.
12. When we speak under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, we, like the angels, are speaking "the words of Christ."
13. Nephi's admonition to "feast upon the words of Christ" refers primarily to the daily guidance we can receive from the Holy Ghost and only secondarily to study of the scriptures.
14. The gospel of Jesus Christ articulates the only way by which a person can access eternal life.

Conclusions

The only known passage in ancient or modern scripture where the Father and the Son personally teach a prophet their gospel is found in 2 Nephi 31. It constitutes the second part of Nephi's final sermon, the three sections of which are formally delimited as *inclusios*. Nephi did not include an account of this unparalleled experience in his initial account of the larger vision of which it was a part, but held it back for emphasized presentation at the end of his writings. The formulation of the gospel—as received by Nephi in that vision—provided the basic model of how to come unto Christ for the Nephite dispensation and is the one the Saints of the last dispensation have been directed to study and teach.

Apparently following a pattern set for him by the Father and the Son, Nephi's summary of the gospel message is composed of a series of meristic statements based on a complex of six gospel elements. These six can be identified as fundamental when we analyze their sixty-four occurrences—using a method of accumulation. Perhaps because of the unfamiliar writing techniques Nephi used to compose this spectacular passage, modern readers can easily overlook its full significance and character. As they learn to appreciate its true value and content, it may help them understand the gospel of Jesus

Christ even more correctly and more fully than has been possible on the basis of other scriptures or traditions. And once they understand his gospel, they can understand the universal prophecy and promise given to all men and women in this world that if they will come unto Jesus Christ in the way he has specified, and endure to the end, they will receive eternal life—and that the consequences will be dire for those who reject him. **RE**

Notes

1. Readers may notice some differences of spelling, punctuation, or even wording in quotations as I am using Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), which provides the most accurate Book of Mormon text now available.

2. See Noel B. Reynolds, “Nephi,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 3:1003–5.

3. See Noel B. Reynolds, “The Gospel of Jesus Christ as Taught by the Nephite Prophets,” *BYU Studies* 31, no. 3 (Summer 1991): 31–50, for my first published discussion of these three passages. For a briefer version, see also “Nephi,” 3:1003–5.

4. Another advantage of the essay approach is that it frees me from the scholarly requirement of documenting the connections between my assertions and the writings of others. Instead, I will occasionally refer to my own publications where points have been developed or documented more fully, in the hope that these references might be helpful for some readers. By taking this approach, I will be able to present a comprehensive interpretation of 2 Nephi 31 in a single paper and refer those desiring more detailed discussions of certain points to other readily available articles.

5. For an explanation of how the Book of Mormon writers use the terms “gospel” and “doctrine” of Christ interchangeably, see Noel B. Reynolds, “This Is the Way,” *Religious Educator* 14, no. 3 (2013): 82–83. See 1 Nephi 15:14 and Jacob 7:6, where Nephi and Jacob respectively include explicitly interchangeable use of the two terms in their records.

6. Compare Lehi’s account in 1 Nephi 10:7–10 with Nephi’s account in 1 Nephi 11:27.

7. For how Book of Mormon study and use came into its own among Latter-day Saints after the introduction of the correlated curriculum in 1972, see Noel B. Reynolds, “The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon in the Twentieth Century,” *BYU Studies* 38, no. 2 (Spring 1999).

8. See Noel B. Reynolds, “The Fifth Principle of the Gospel,” *Religious Educator* 15, no. 3 (2014): 117–27, for an account of how “enduring to the end” was eventually recognized and included as a basic gospel principle in official Church publications—beginning with *Preach My Gospel* in 2005.

9. For the first demonstration of these six elements as definitional in these three presentations, see Reynolds, “The Gospel of Jesus Christ as Taught by the Nephite Prophets.” See also Noel B. Reynolds, “The True Points of My Doctrine,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5, no. 2 (Fall 1996): 26–56, for a basic survey of how each of these six gospel principles is developed and used by writers throughout the Book of Mormon. Noel B. Reynolds, “The Gospel According to Mormon,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 68, no. 2 (May 2015): 218–34, presents a much more technical analysis of the same materials, written for non-LDS scholars.

10. For discussion of scholarly findings on this point, see Reynolds, "Coming Forth," 6.

11. Nephi repeats this reminder that he is speaking or prophesying by the Spirit four more times: 2 Nephi 25:11, 28:1, 32:7, and in 33:1.

12. For a detailed explanation of *inclusio*, or envelope structures, see Reynolds, "The Gospel According to Mormon," 218–34, or, for a briefer account, Reynolds, "This Is the Way," 80. In note 2 of the latter article, I explained: "*Inclusio* is used here in the sense developed by biblical scholars and defined by David Ulansey as 'the narrative device common in biblical texts in which a detail is repeated at the beginning and the end of a narrative unit in order to 'bracket off' the unit and give it a sense of closure and structural integrity.' See David Ulansey, 'The Heavenly Veil Torn: Mark's Cosmic 'Inclusio,'" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 123. Literary scholars also refer to the *inclusio* as "envelope structure—in fact a structure popular in many biblical genres—in which significant terms introduced at the beginning are brought back prominently at the end." See an account of how these structures are used prominently in the psalms in Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, eds., "Psalms," *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 255 and following pages.

13. Nephi's penchant for elaborate rhetorical structures in his writing has been recognized for a long time and may be what he has in mind at the very beginning of the small plates when he points out to us explicitly that he "was taught somewhat in all the learning of [his] father." See Noel B. Reynolds, "Nephi's Outline," *BYU Studies* 20, no. 2 (Spring 1980): 1–18, for a detailed analysis of rhetorical structures in First Nephi.

14. This discussion of Nephi's fivefold presentation of the gospel in this chapter is drawn directly from Reynolds, "The Gospel of Jesus Christ as Taught by the Nephite Prophets," 35–36.

15. See Reynolds, "The Fifth Principle of the Gospel," 117–27.

16. See Noel B. Reynolds and Royal Skousen, "Was the Path Nephi Saw 'Strait and Narrow' or 'Straight and Narrow?'" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10, no. 2 (2001): 30–33 for an early discussion of my reasons for preferring "straight" to "strait" as the original text for this passage. Further, see Royal Skousen's more recent and definitive exposition of this question in his *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon: Part One (1 Nephi 1–2 Nephi 10)* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 174–81, which articulates what I find to be a convincing argument for "straight" in 1 Nephi 8:20, 2 Nephi 31:18, 19, and as the more likely original text in several related passages.

17. See Reynolds, "The Gospel of Jesus Christ as Taught by the Nephite Prophets," 31–50, where cumulative analysis was first used implicitly to understand this passage and Reynolds, "The Gospel According to Mormon," 218–34, for a complete and revised technical analysis.

18. See Reynolds, "The Gospel of Jesus Christ as Taught by the Nephite Prophets," 43–46, for a more developed explanation of *merismus*.

19. Other examples of New Testament passages that feature meristic statements of the gospel include Ephesians 2:8, Matthew 3:11, 24:13–14, Acts 2:38, 19:4–6, and Romans 1:16.

20. I have identified hundreds of these meristic statements of the gospel throughout the Book of Mormon in Noel B. Reynolds, "Biblical Merismus in Book of Mormon Gospel References," *Society of Biblical Literature* (forthcoming).

21. These quotations from the Father and the Son are located in 2 Nephi 31:10, 11, 12, 14, 15, and 20.

22. See Noel B. Reynolds, "Understanding Christian Baptism through the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 51, no. 2 (2012): 4–37, for a systematic examination of baptism as taught in the Book of Mormon and of the evidences for a similar understanding in New Testament texts.

23. See Reynolds, "Understanding Christian Baptism through the Book of Mormon," 9.

24. Compare with Moroni 7:41.

25. See Reynolds, "This Is the Way," 79–91. In total, there are seven passages in Nephi's record where the terms "path" and "way" are used conjointly, referring to this same thing—two occur in the Isaiah chapters (1 Nephi 8:23, 10:8; 2 Nephi 4:33, 9:41, 12:3, 13:12, 31:18).

26. See Ether 12:31–37, Moroni 7, and Moroni 10:20–23. See also Nephi's own invocations of this developed notion of charity at 2 Nephi 26:30 and 33:7–9.

27. For a more detailed discussion of this passage and its implications, see Reynolds, "This Is the Way," 79–91.

28. See Reynolds, "Understanding Christian Baptism through the Book of Mormon," 9–10.

29. See Titus 1:2.

30. See Reynolds, "The Gospel According to Mormon," 226–27.

31. See Reynolds, "The Fifth Principle of the Gospel," 121–22.